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## App Review

### ‘Tour of the Nile’ iPad App by Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London

The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London has long been at the forefront of new digital media approaches to museology. In 2000, well before many like-minded institutions thought of digital outreach, the Petrie created ‘Digital Egypt for Universities’ (Grajetzki, et al., 2000). In 2002, it became the first museum in the world to put its entire collection of 80,000 artefacts online in a searchable database with photos (Anon., 2002). Both of these have become invaluable online Egyptological resources for researchers, students and enthusiasts alike. In 2010, long before most people had a tablet computer, the Petrie Museum installed first-generation iPads in the museum foyer — as if throwing down a gauntlet to the transformative digital challenges facing museum visitors. And now, once again, the Petrie Museum has continued its progressive technological ethos with an iPad app (Amati, et al., 2013). I can say with some assuredness that I have seen the future of digital museology and it is found in the Petrie Museum’s 3D iPad app ‘Tour of the Nile’.

‘Tour of the Nile’ uses Augmented Reality. Augmented Reality apps began hitting the market in droves recently as developers began to harness the multimedia functionality of smartphones and tablets and their built-in cameras. Using the camera capabilities of media consumption devices, combined with their advanced processors, an Augmented Reality app can take a standard picture and then overlay additional information onto the 2d image, thereby augmenting the users’ reality. As it happens in the computer world (and as it did with Virtual Reality) a great deal of these advances were initially devised by software companies for use in the gaming community. NASA, the US space agency, was one of the first to develop an IOS Augmented Reality app with *Spacecraft 3D*, an app that lets children play with high-definition 3D models of the Mars Curiosity Rover (Agle, et al., 2012).

Stuart Eve, a PhD student at University College London, has published a fascinating blog-post that elucidates the differences between the Real Environment (RE) and the Virtual Environment (VE) along the Reality/Virtuality (RV) continuum, as well as the differences between Virtual Reality (the opposite of real reality), Mixed Reality (has aspects of virtuality and reality and can include Augmented Reality and Augmented Virtuality), and Augmented Reality (a merger of reality and virtuality) — and their potential for use in archaeology (Eve, 2013). For our purposes it is enough to say that looking at an Egyptological artefact in a regular 2D photo versus one via the Augmented Reality of ‘Tour of the Nile’ app is the difference between seeing ‘The Dark Knight Rises’ on VHS videotape on a 19-inch vacuum-tubed television and then seeing it on a fifty-storey-high 3D IMAX screen. One is dull and muted and the other, Augmented Reality, is strikingly rich and colourful eye candy.

Here is how it works: the user downloads ‘markers’, which are 2D photos of artefacts embedded with a ‘marker’, essentially a code that the iPad camera recognizes. The app then renders the marker into a 3D image that literally pops out of the iPad screen (see Figures 2 and 3). The user can rotate it with a touch of the finger, turn it upside-down and sideways — basically look at it from any 360-degree angle of their choice. Press the artefact and hold your finger on it and a tab pops up and gives you some more detailed information. Currently, there are only five markers available for download. According to the developers, more markers are planned, as is an iPhone version of the same app.

For a place that is in the business of looking backward in time, the Petrie Museum, rather refreshingly, keeps looking forward. Developed by Giancarlo Amati (Research Associate and



FIGURE 1 Giancarlo Amati (developer) and Ivor Pridden (conservator/image technician) for the 'Tour of the Nile' iPad app. Margaret Serpico, the Petrie's digital curator, was away on holiday and unavailable.

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Digital Developer) in collaboration with Margaret Serpico (Digital Curator) and Ivor Pridden (Conservator and 3D-Image Technician), the app was released in February 2013 (see Figure 1). Its reception has so far been enthusiastic, with over 300 downloads a month. This may not sound like a lot, but according to Tracey Golding, the Petrie Museum's Visitor Services Officer, the museum receives approximately 300–400 actual walk-in visitors per month. Digital outreach with this app and with *Digital Egypt* has essentially enabled the Petrie Museum to more than double its reach in any given month. Unfortunately, the Petrie was unable confirm with the author how many 'hits' their 'Digital Egypt for Universities' website gets on a per-monthly basis.

The appeal of technology to museology as a whole is readily apparent — greater and wider dissemination. The Petrie is not the only London museum to develop an interactive 3D app using Augmented Reality. The Museum of London has released 'Dickens' Dark London' and 'Streetmuseum' apps, but both stress the interactive information features of the app rather than the visual Augmented Reality. The British Museum has released a 2D app to accompany its 'Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum' exhibit, and importantly, they note that the app is not actually supposed to replace a visit to the exhibit but is to be used as supplementary enhancement of one.

However, greater public engagement also has its drawbacks — to some — mainly some Egyptologists who disapprove of public engagement or mass media saturation, viewing it as something akin to a devaluation of principle. For every younger Egyptologist who entered the field initially based on the popular allure of Indiana Jones there are others who blame its popular appeal and supernatural schlock as having been the harbinger of or popularizing further pseudo-archaeological drivel: by authors Erich Von Däniken and Graham Hancock, and practically every movie made by Roland Emmerich. The more pseudo-archaeology that



FIGURE 2 Faience Shbati from Thebes, the Ramesseum, object number UC29999A.

© Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology

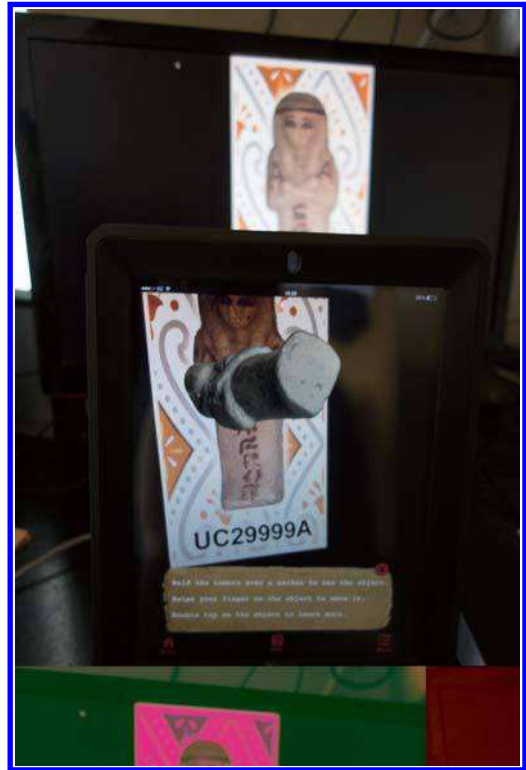


FIGURE 3 Faience Shbati from Thebes, the Ramesseum, object number UC29999A—as seen in Augmented Reality view using external monitor to display the marker.

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becomes popularized, the more traditional Egyptologists are wont to run for the hills. This in turn leads to a detachment and dissonance from the public. It is further compounded by how Egyptology is structurally distinct from other branches of Near Eastern archaeological discourse anyway; in that its over-emphasis on the academically arcane has led to the field resembling one in which participants speak the esoteric language of initiation expected of them, while referring to the non-initiated patronizingly as ‘pyramidiots’. One British archaeologist who clearly wanted to cloak his/her condescension through anonymity once said of these academically uninitiated pyramidiots that: ‘It’s far easier to get on the bandwagon than to spend twenty years in Egypt learning what the pyramids are really about’ (see Downer, 1997).

Notwithstanding the idiocy (pyramidiocy perhaps?) inherent in the above statement, what if someone wants to learn more about Egypt without pilfering through some of the pseudo-archaeology that pervades the world-wide web but also does not want to spend twenty years in the search for Egyptological enlightenment? Pseudo-archaeology websites on Egypt come in two forms: one is the obvious drivel like <[www.opencheops.org](http://www.opencheops.org)> that attempts to tie Egypt into masonic tradition, aliens, and the Bible; the other are commercial sites like <[www.toureygypt.net](http://www.toureygypt.net)> that are really there to sell packaged trips and in the process get some

of their Egyptological facts wrong and purposely play up Ancient Egyptian exceptionalism in an effort to sell tours.

This dichotomy in archaeology between the guardians of the sacred (academics) and the carousers of the profane (pyramidiots) needs bridging. Joseph Wilson, writing in this journal about this rapprochement, argued that greater public engagement would open seemingly closed doors and '[...] allow participation and undermine the false image of professional archaeologists as ivory-tower elitists' (Wilson, 2012: 92).

Perhaps it is too much to suggest that an iPad app can do this. But it can help and is one component of the Petrie's outreach efforts via new technologies. In addition to apps and *Digital Egypt*, the Petrie attempts to engage the greater public via social media, blogs, and international Skype sessions with schoolchildren (Anon., 2011; Tenhet, 2011). The Petrie's affiliated membership society, Friends of the Petrie Museum (PMF), was created in 1988 to aid with public access and education, holds a vibrant series of lectures and events, and maintains a lively social media presence. The purpose of all this is not just outreach but enhancement of the museum experience, and, like the British Museum's app, *Tour of the Nile* is not intended to replace a museum visit. In a recent discussion with the author, Amati has said that:

As a digital developer I am interested in enhancing visitor journey when they visit the museum. So we designed *Tour of the Nile* because we wanted to link the artefacts back to their original dig sites. One more reason, is also providing the visitors with a tool that would let them explore our collection in a more interactive way giving them the sense to 'touch virtual objects as they obviously can't touch/handle the real ones.

So really the app serves several purposes: engagement of the greater public, enhancement of the museum visit, and the ability to touch an artefact. And if you are too lazy to visit one of the finest Egyptian artefactual collections around, you can touch a faience *shabti* from the comfort of your own home.

Enthusiastic app downloaders and laudatory reviewing aside, there are some quibbles. There are only five markers and none have been added since its launch in February of 2013 — a missed opportunity since the Augmented Reality features are what makes this app so stunning. The user interface is a little clunky and not particularly intuitive. The papyrus theme takes skeuomorphism<sup>1</sup> to a new level at just the time that Apple itself, the main proponent of skeuomorphism, has parted ways with the dated feel of parchment and leather themes in the recently released iOS 7 (Judah, 2013). This and the obligatory homage to Petrie within the app shown in a mini-biography highlights the prickly conflicts inherent in disseminating the past while using tools of the future. What makes the app interesting is not the obligatory reverence paid to Flinders Petrie that weigh down its forward march like an anchor — what makes it interesting is its embrace of technology and the future. But the app is a bold step for a museum that has welcomed the future while still paying homage to the past.

Finally, regarding Augmented Reality one may think that: 'We've been down this road before, we've embraced the idea of faddish technology, for example, whatever happened to Virtual Reality anyway? Wasn't *that* supposed to be the next best thing?'. It is refreshing to see the Petrie try to engage the public in newfound ways. The *Tour of the Nile* is a great start; it is very innovative and will go a long way towards helping to demystify Egyptology. The 'next big thing' is always on the horizon. Some flame out, some pan out, but, in its defence, the Augmented Reality in *Tour of the Nile* is way better than Virtual Reality ever could have become and never did. Really. And maybe it will engage the public, save the enthusiast from the dreaded curse of pyramidiocy and entice that public to want to study the pyramids for twenty years. Or, more likely, it will let them learn a bit about Egypt from the comfort of their own homes and entice them to eventually leave the app at home and visit the Petrie Museum in person.

JUSTIN YOO

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Skeuomorphism is a design style popularized by Apple Computers in which design elements imitate and resemble real world items, such as this Petrie app using a papyrus theme to resemble Egyptological documents.

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